

Main Idea: In Acts 28:1-16 we discover two insights regarding God and how He works.

- I. At times, God works in spectacular ways (1-10).
 - A. The Lord used the bite of a viper (1-6).
 1. A sinner can’t ignore the miraculous.
 2. A sinner will misunderstand the miraculous.
 3. A sinner needs a new mind to make sense of the miraculous.
 - B. The Lord used the healing of the sick (7-10).
 1. God uses miracles to validate His message.
 2. God uses miracles to validate His messengers.
 - II. Typically, God works through the ordinary (11-16).
 - A. The Lord provided a safe journey (11-13).
 - B. The Lord provided people (14-15).
 1. God uses His people to encourage His people.
 2. God uses people who are available.
 - C. The Lord provided a place to live and minister (16).
- Make It Personal: When you wonder what God is doing...
1. Remember God’s promises.
 2. See the big picture.
 3. Realize He is not done yet.

Sometimes when God is working, it doesn’t seem like God is working. That’s not double talk. That’s the Christian life in the real world. It’s also the case as we come to this morning’s text in the book of Acts. We’ve arrived at the final chapter of the book of Acts. We’ve been watching the mission of Christ move forward, step by step, obstacle by obstacle. To prepare ourselves for today’s message, let’s read a prayer that Paul wrote not long after he experienced what we’re about to see.

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 3:14-21

In the farmhouse where I grew up there was an interesting set of marks on the doorframe in the kitchen. Some of those marks were there before I left home. Most were added after. The marks represented the height of our family members at various times over the years. Next to the mark was the date on which the mark was made. You could take a quick glance at the marks and see the rate of growth for the grandchildren, nephews, nieces, dogs, and more.

When our girls were little, they used to pay close attention to those marks. “How much have I grown, Grandpa?” they would ask, for kids love to see evidence that they’re growing.

So do churches. Living things are supposed to grow, and since the church is a living organism, the very Body of Christ, there ought to be evidence of that growth.

But what kind of evidence? Unfortunately, we’re prone to take our cues from the corporate world rather than the Bible at this point. *Bodies, bucks, and buildings. Those are the evidences that a church is growing.*

Maybe. Maybe not. More people in the seats, more money in the offerings, more facilities for church activity, yes, it may be evidence of God’s blessing. But it could be the result of something else, like persuasive marketing practices, or even sheep-stealing.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see the Acts series preached at WBC in 2003.

Please don't misunderstand. When God blesses a church, there is often an increase in numbers, and giving, and facility improvements for ministry, and by God's grace, we've experienced those blessings at WBC recently. But we've also experienced times when they were absent, and God was working then too, growing His church.

It's not always easy to quantify the growth that God gives. When it comes to growth, there are *seasons*. Sometimes a ministry will produce new life like a garden in the springtime. At other times, however, it's like corn in the month of August, not as obvious to the naked eye, but the growth, the maturing, is happening. And then, sometimes it's winter. Is winter bad? No. It's actually an important part of the growth cycle, by the design of the Creator.

To put it another way, sometimes God's work advances by leaps and bounds, and it's obvious for all to see. But there are other times when God's work moves ahead inch by inch, almost imperceptibly.

When it came to ministry in the latter part of the book of Acts, it was the latter for Paul. After being arrested in Acts 21, he didn't see much progress in human terms. There weren't too many statistics to report in his missionary letters. He was incarcerated for two years for a crime he hadn't committed. He faced legal challenges, and due to injustice in the legal system he was forced to appeal to Caesar. As if matters couldn't get worse, they did and he nearly lost his life in a hurricane, ending up shipwrecked on an island.

Ministry had slipped into low gear for Paul, not by his own choice, and not because of sin either, but by sovereign design. Until we settle this issue, we'll live frustrated lives.

Our God is sovereign. He is sovereign in salvation. He is also sovereign in ministry. "I will build My church," the Lord Jesus said. And sometimes He builds at a rate and in a manner that we can't mark on our board in the kitchen.

God gave Paul a promise in Acts 23:11, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome." So, you're going to Rome, Paul! "Great!" Paul must have thought. He'd wanted to minister in Rome for years, and now God told him he was on his way. Little did he know, however, just how hard the road would be, and how long it would take.

The Lord has given us promises, too. "You're going to heaven, and I'll meet all your needs all along the way. And until you get there, you will be my witnesses, to the ends of the earth." And He meant what He said.

However, at times, indeed, many times, He fulfills His promises in ways that don't make sense to us. He uses hardship to provide the canvas backdrop of His redemptive work. He allows us to face setbacks and difficulties and opposition. There are seasons of life when it seems we're just *inching ahead*, if that.

Perhaps you're in such a phase right now. If so, I hope you'll be encouraged by Acts 28. Acts 28 reminds us that what God promises, God will fulfill, in His time and in His way. In Acts 28, Paul finally makes it to Rome, yes, *in chains*, but he is there, making Jesus known in the highest levels of Roman society.

Indeed, in the bigger scheme of things, this is the climax of the book of Acts. In Acts 1:8, the Lord told His followers, "You will be my witnesses, starting in Jerusalem and Judea, then in Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth." And what the Lord says He will do, He does. Always. But in His own time and way.

In Acts 1-7, He guided His people to accomplish phase #1, in Jerusalem. Then He accomplished phase #2 by reaching Judea and Samaria in Acts 8-12. Then, beginning in Acts 13, He scattered His people to make Himself known to the rest of the world, with the hub of that first century world being Rome itself.

I've entitled today's message, "*The Spectacular (and Unspectacular) Ways of God.*" That's what we see in Acts 28:1-16, and it's what we see it in our own lives too. This is how God works. This is how God brings about the kind of growth that pleases Him.

I. At times, God works in spectacular ways (1-10).

Obvious. Undeniable. Eye-catching. There are times when God is at work and one would have to be blind to miss it. We serve the God who can do the impossible, the *spectacular*, and sometimes He does just that.

In our text the Lord worked in two spectacular ways in Paul's life.

A. The Lord used the bite of a viper (1-6). Here's how it happened:

Verse 1 says, "After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta." The "we" includes the 276 people (27:37) that survived the storm and shipwreck of chapter 27. Malta is an island in the Mediterranean Sea (17 miles long and 9 miles wide), located about 500 miles south of Rome.

In verse 2 Luke says, "The native people showed us unusual kindness." The KJV calls them "the barbarous people" based on the Greek term *barbaroi*. Barclay explains, "To the Greek the barbarian was a man who said *bar-bar*, that is, a man who spoke an unintelligible foreign language and not the beautiful Greek tongue. We come nearer to the meaning when we simply call them the *natives*."²

The middle of verse 2 shows how the natives demonstrated their kindness. "...for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold." Remember, it's the winter season and all Paul, Luke, and the other 274 sea travelers have with them is the wet clothing on their backs.

Verse 3 begins, "When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire..." Please don't miss the obvious in this very unassuming statement. Paul, the brilliant preacher, theologian, and author of half of the New Testament books, was *gathering sticks*. No task is too small for the true servant of God.

A century ago a man traveled with two women, hoping to enroll his daughter in D. L. Moody's school for young women.³ "The three needed help in getting their luggage from the railway depot to the hotel, so the visitor 'drafted' a rather common-looking man with a horse and wagon, assuming he was a local cabby. The 'cabby' said he was waiting for students, but the visitor ordered him to take them to the hotel. The visitor was shocked when the 'cabby' did not charge him, and was even more shocked to discover that the 'cabby' was D. L. Moody himself!"

If we are interested in being God's kind of leader, we must learn how to serve.

While feeding the fire, something unexpected occurred. Paul picked up one stick that was "alive." Verse 3 says, "When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand." Apparently, Paul mistook the viper for a stick since in the cold weather it would be stiff. But warmed by the fire, it came to life and sank its fangs into Paul's hand.

Verse 4 "When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, 'No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.'" It's a basic belief held by people worldwide. Do good and God will reward you. Do bad and He will get you. Good people get what's coming to them, and bad people get what's coming to them.

This is how the world thinks. Tit for tat. You get what's coming to you.

² Barclay, p. 187.

³ As told by W. Wiersbe, p. 510.

And in a works-oriented world, here's something that's a foreign concept. *Grace*. That God would bless undeserving people with His favor makes no sense to the natural mind. Nor does the fact that God would send to hell people who consider themselves "good" because they've done their best.

Let there be no misunderstanding. God accepts people on the basis of His grace, through faith in His Son, not on the basis of our merit. This is the message of His Word.

What happened next rattled the erroneous world-view of the islanders. Verses 5-6 tell us, "He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. ⁶ They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god."

We might conclude from this that Paul is an invincible fellow. He's not. But he does belong to a God who is, a God who has a plan for His people, a God who won't stop until He completes that plan.

A few weeks ago I mentioned John Piper's book *Providence*, and his title to chapter 25, "We Are Immortal till Our Work Is Done." He came up with that title by citing Henry Martyn, a missionary to India and Persia who died when he was thirty-one, who wrote in his journal in January 1812: "To all appearance, the present year will be more perilous than any I have seen...But whether life or death be mine, may Christ be magnified in me! If he has work for me to do, I cannot die."⁴

"This has often been paraphrased," says Piper, "as 'I am immortal till Christ's work for me to do is done.' This is profoundly true. And it rests squarely on Martyn's confidence that life and death are in the hands of a sovereign God. Indeed, the entire cause of Christ is in his hand."⁵

Do you struggle with fear and anxiety? This is such a vital perspective. Every day affirm that your life is in God's hands, and trust for the outcome. He is sovereign, wise, and good. Let Him work out His plan for your life. He can do spectacular things, and sometimes He does!

Let's take a closer look at this miracle, with a question in mind. What kind of effect does the miraculous have on a sinner? Three effects.

1. *A sinner can't ignore the miraculous.* The people on Malta saw it with their eyes. They saw the viper. They saw it hanging from Paul's hand, passing its deadly juices into his body. They saw Paul shake it into the fire. They stared at him and waited for him to drop. That's what happens when a viper strikes a man. But not this time. What they saw this time defied explanation. What they saw this time was a miracle.

By the way, some scholars say that Luke fabricated this story because there are no poisonous snakes of any kind on Malta today. But Luke didn't say there would be a viper on Malta in 2022. He said there was one there in AD 60, and that one bit Paul. Certainly, snake populations can change. F. F. Bruce cites Ireland as an example, which has been free from snakes for centuries, although tradition asserts they were once plentiful there until banished by Finn MacCumhail (according to pagan legend) or by St. Patrick (according to the Christian account).

The miraculous produces a second kind of effect on a sinner...

⁴ Henry Martyn, *Journal and Letters of Henry Martyn* (New York: Protestant and Episcopal for the Promotion of Evangelical Knowledge, 1851), 460.

⁵ John Piper, *Providence*, pp. 376-7.

2. *A sinner will misunderstand the miraculous.* The islanders did. These folks saw a miracle in living color yet came to the wrong conclusion. First, they said Paul was a murderer caught by Justice, one of their goddesses. Next they concluded he was a god!

Sometimes people say, “Well, if the Lord would just let me see a miracle, I’d believe in Him.” That’s not true. If a sinner did see the miraculous, he would come to wrong conclusions because his thinking is darkened. In point of fact, he has the miraculous evidence of God all around him. He sees it every time he looks at the stars or at a newborn baby. But he doesn’t submit to the Lord. Why not? The fact is, a sinner needs more than evidence.

1 Corinthians 2:14 says, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God [including miracles], for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” Here’s what a sinner needs.

3. *A sinner needs a new mind to make sense of the miraculous.* Romans 8:6-8 explains why, “The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.”

If a sinner is ever going to see a miracle and respond appropriately, He needs a new mind. Only the Spirit of God can give him one, and that’s what the Spirit does the moment He produces new birth in the sinner’s heart.

Let me bring it closer to home. If you’re trying to make sense of God on your own, you’ll fail. You need a new mind. You need the Holy Spirit. You need to be born again. Talk about spectacular! There’s nothing more spectacular than the new birth.

After the viper incident, the Lord worked in a second spectacular way in verses 7-10.

B. The Lord used the healing of the sick (7-10). Verse 7 says, “Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days.”

Talk about hospitality! If the “us” refers to all 276 survivors of the shipwreck, this Publius must have had a large home and food pantry.

One thing we know he had was a sick dad, as Luke explains in verse 8. “It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him.”

Stop there for a moment. Malta has long had a peculiar and unpleasant gastric fever of its own, called “Malta fever,” caused by a microbe in goat’s milk. Apparently, the father of this chief had that ailment, or something like it. That’s a problem, isn’t it?

But God often turns problems, in this case a sickness, into ministry opportunities. Here’s an example, verses 8-9, “And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him. And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured.”

Please notice that Paul initiated the first healing, not Publius nor his dad. The text says that Paul went to see the bedfast man, prayed, laid hands on him, and healed him.

Isn’t it interesting that as an apostle Paul had the ability to heal others, and at times he did so, but he himself lived with a thorn in the flesh? That says something to us about the biblical purpose of miracles. There are two purposes we must keep in mind if we’re going to maintain a biblical understanding of miracles.

1. *God uses miracles to validate His message.* That’s why Paul healed this man. This miracle substantiated the validity of the gospel message for these lost people. The miracle said loudly, “You’d better listen to what this man has to say!” And apparently, they did.

Interestingly, Luke here uses two different terms for healing. Verse 8 says that Paul “healed” the father of Publius, an obvious miracle. In verse 9 the text says that other sick people came and “were cured.” Barclay explains, “The [second] word used is the word for *receiving medical attention*; and there are scholars who think that this can well mean, not only that they came to Paul, but that they came to Luke who gave them of his medical skill. If that be so, this passage gives us the earliest picture we possess of the work of a *medical missionary*.”⁶

So there seem to be two kinds of healing here, the miraculous by Paul, and the medical by Luke. God used both to validate His message.

2. *God uses miracles to validate His messengers.* Notice verse 10, “They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.” When we’re truly grateful to the Lord for His blessings, we’ll show it to the messengers He used to deliver those blessings. The islanders responded to what God did for them by giving honor and supplies to Paul and the others.

Take that thought a step further. When our relationship with the Lord is right, it affects our attitude towards the things we possess. We become a giver rather than a hoarder. Luke says they “honored us with many honors (KJV).”

So, how does God work? At times, He works in spectacular ways. At Malta, He used the bite of a viper and the healing of the sick to validate His servant and subsequently, to bring the lost to Himself. Tradition says that Publius became the first bishop of the church of Malta. Yes, our God can do the spectacular, and there are times when we’ll see that happen in our lives.

However... God doesn’t always do what He *can* do.

II. Typically, God works through the ordinary (11-16).

The unspectacular. The commonplace. The normal. Granted, God can speak through a donkey, as He did to Balaam, or in thunderous voice, as He did on the Mount of Transfiguration. In times past, He spoke in such spectacular ways. But today we have something “more certain” than spectacular, mountain top experiences, as Peter put it in 2 Peter 1:19. Today He speaks to us every time we open the Scriptures.

Do you want to hear God speak to you audibly? Then read this book out loud!

This is the norm. Sure, God can do the spectacular. He can do whatever He wants. But typically, God works through the ordinary. In fact, that was true even for the apostle Paul. Luke illustrates this for us in verses 11-16 by showing how the Lord provided for Paul in three very wonderful, albeit very “ordinary” ways.

A. The Lord provided a safe journey (11-13). Verse 11 says, “After three months [that made it the middle of February] we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead.” The NIV says, “It was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux.”

Stop there for a moment. Why does Luke include this information about the ship’s design? I’m not sure, but just picture in your mind’s eye this peculiar site. There’s a ship sailing north to Rome with two pagan gods as figureheads, and onboard is an ambassador of the King of kings!

It’s interesting how God often uses pagan inventions to advance His cause. Take, for instance, technology. This past Monday we used Zoom and Livestream (we didn’t even have those words in our vocabulary five years ago) to present a workshop by Dr. Hodges

⁶ Barclay, p. 189.

on a biblical approach to OCD. That presentation is now available to minister to people worldwide. We are privileged to use technology created by the world to do God's work.

Caster and Pollux were false, pagan gods, the so-called "sons of Zeus" and supposed guardians of sailors. But were they really? Chapter 27 makes it clear just how impotent pagan gods are when the true God sends a storm! The fact that God uses something doesn't mean He endorses it.

The trip log continues in verse 12, "Putting in at Syracuse [located on the island of Sicily, 95 miles from Malta], we stayed there for three days." Tradition says that Paul started a church in Syracuse during these three days.

Verse 13, "And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium [located on the "toe" of Italy, 75 miles from Syracuse]. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli."

The final leg at sea covered 210 miles, a journey that would take 24 to 26 hours with a good south wind. Luke verifies they arrived on the following day. Puteoli was the chief seaport for Rome, a city of 100,000 people in Paul's day. Paul had arrived in Italy.

Here's what stands out to me about this journey. It was *uneventful*. How many times do we hop in our car, drive across town or across the state, arrive safely at our destination, and *fail to thank the One who made it possible*? Friends, the Lord is at work in our lives, but so often we miss it. We fail to see Him because we fail to recognize that many, if not most of His works are in the realm of the *ordinary*.

Yes, God can send an angel at the last moment to rescue us from a head-on collision, but most of the time He protects us in less impressive ways. As He did with Paul. Ordinary provision #1—the Lord provided a safe journey.

B. The Lord provided people (14-15). Although the sailing was over, the traveling wasn't. They were still 150 miles from Rome, a distance they would cover by land, most of it on the famous Appian Way.

God sent some special people into Paul's life at the end of the trip. Verse 14 says, "There [at Puteoli] we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome." God has His people He has rescued all over the place, and when rescued people meet other rescued people, there's an instant bond.

Don't be lulled to sleep by the final six words in 14. "And so we came to Rome."

That's a loaded statement. Three years earlier Paul wrote a letter to the church in Rome, sharing his intense burden to come to the capital city (Romans 1:9-11, NIV): "God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you..."

At the end of his letter, he repeated his desire in Romans 15:23-24 (NIV), "But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while."

As the months turned into years he must have wondered if his ministry-dream would ever come to pass. He had endured two monotonous years in a Roman prison, followed by two weeks of terror-filled days stranded at sea. The setbacks were plentiful, but God was faithful. *And so we came to Rome.*

Yet even as he approached Rome he must have wondered, "What have the believers heard about me, and how will the church accept me?" What he saw next must have thrilled his soul.

Notice verse 15, “And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius [that’s 43 miles from Rome] and Three Taverns [that’s 33 miles from Rome] to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage.”

Please note the term Luke uses. He says “the brothers” came. That’s what we are as fellow Christians, *brothers*. That’s how we’re to relate to each other. We are *family*, and the tie that binds us together is not only stronger than blood, but *is* blood, the very blood of Christ Himself.

The actions of these Roman believers teach us two things about how God works.

1. *God uses His people to encourage His people.* Luke is very specific in verse 15 (NIV), “*At the sight of these men* Paul thanked God and was encouraged.” On the one hand, they didn’t do anything big. They were just *there*. And that’s the point. They were *there*. Your presence at the right place at the right time can be used by God to bring great encouragement to His people.

The next time you find yourself thinking, “I don’t think I’m going to Sunday School today. It won’t matter if I’m not there,” please reconsider. Your presence speaks loudly. It says to your teacher, “I appreciate you for investing study time this week to feed our souls.” It says to your fellow-classmates, “I value you. Being with you is important to me because God has made us a family.”

On Thursday a woman came to me at the Appalachian Ministry Conference in South Point and said, “You probably don’t remember me, but when I saw your name, I remembered you. I visited your church 29 years ago. On that first Sunday, I sat right up front with my little baby, and we came for a couple of months. And then life took us other places. Thank you.”

That was a humbling moment, at first, because I couldn’t remember her. She shared her name, and it brought back some vague memories from three decades ago. But humbling for a more important reason. It reminded me that this is how God typically works. It’s so *ordinary*. He uses His people to encourage His people.

2. *God uses people who are available.* Let this sink in. These brothers walked 30 to 45 miles, and why? To show their love for a man they had never met. Why’d they do that? For starters, because this man was an apostle of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and when Christ gives a gift to His church, the church values that gift. But it’s more personal than that. This man they’d never met was kin to them, part of their forever family. And they wanted to show him how much he meant to them.

Let’s not underestimate the power of personal presence this week, through a phone call, a card, or a visit, or coming to the Wednesday evening service with a conscious purpose to encourage someone you don’t know. Let’s make ourselves available to God this week.

One final “ordinary” provision...

C. The Lord provided a place to live and minister (16). “And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.”

God’s blessings come in all shapes and sizes. If you’re expecting a five-star hotel, a private house with a soldier chained to your arm would produce complaints. But if your agenda in life is to know Christ and make Him known to others, then you’d be rejoicing. As we’ll see next time, Paul turned the house into a ministry-center and viewed the soldier as a prime target for evangelism!

By the way, how do you view your house? Do you see it as *yours* or God’s? Is it a castle where you hide, or a ministry center where you serve? Paul realized what we tend to miss. The house we live in is another “ordinary” provision from our gracious God.

We've learned two things about our God today. One, He can work in spectacular ways, but two, typically He works through the ordinary.

One of my favorite things to do when vacationing at the beach is to wade out into the ocean. Here's how it goes. You venture out until the water is about chest high, dive into the waves, and do a little body surfing. Then you kick up your heels, relax, and go with the flow. It's great. But after about 15 minutes or so you notice something has happened. *You've moved.* It happened so slowly you weren't aware of it at the time, but sure enough, you've moved. How can you tell? You look at the shore and notice that the landmarks have changed. You don't see your chair in the sand or the hotel behind it any longer. Indeed, you discover the waves have moved you fifty yards or so north of where you started. The movement occurred slowly, but surely.

So it is in God's work. Jesus said in Acts 1:8, "I'll provide the power and you will be my witnesses to reach the world." Sometimes it doesn't seem like anything's happening, like we're not moving, like God's plan has stalled. Sometimes you feel like you're living in Acts 27, stranded at sea or stuck on an unknown island.

Be patient. Acts 28 is coming. "He who began a good work in you will perform it until the day of Christ (Phil 1:6)."

Make It Personal: When you wonder what God is doing...do three things.

1. *Remember God's promises.* If you feel like you're stranded in the ocean of life, lift your eyes and notice the landmarks. It may seem like nothing's happening, but that's because we're looking in the wrong direction. When my eyes are on the waves, I don't realize I am moving. When I look to the landmarks on shore, I begin to see things differently.

We need to fix our gaze on God's promises, brothers and sisters. If you can't see what God is doing, ponder what He *said* He would do. You can be sure He is doing just that, so look for evidences of it.⁷

The great New England preacher Phillips Brooks was noted for his poise and quiet manner. At times, however, even he suffered moments of frustration and irritability. One day a friend saw him feverishly pacing the floor like a caged lion. "What's the trouble, Mr. Brooks?" he asked.

"The trouble is that I'm in a hurry, but God isn't!" Haven't we felt the same way many times?

Some of the greatest missionaries of history devotedly spread the seed of God's Word and yet had to wait long periods before seeing the fruit of their efforts. William Carey, for example, labored 7 years before the first Hindu convert was brought to Christ in Burma, and Adoniram Judson toiled 7 years before his faithful preaching was rewarded. In western Africa, it was 14 years before one convert was received into the Christian church. In New Zealand, it took 9 years; and in Tahiti, it was 16 years before the first harvest of souls began.⁸

When you wonder what God is doing, remember His promises.

⁷ G. Campbell Morgan said, "Waiting for God is not laziness. Waiting for God is not going to sleep. Waiting for God is not the abandonment of effort. Waiting for God means, first, activity under command; second, readiness for any new command that may come; third, the ability to do nothing until the command is given."

⁸ *Daily Bread*

2. *See the big picture.* Don't become consumed merely with what's happened in the last month or year. Look at what's happening today from God's perspective. Again, the promises of God help us. God's promises provide the frame for the picture.

According to a traditional Hebrew story, Abraham was sitting outside his tent one evening when he saw an old man, weary from age and journey, coming toward him. Abraham rushed out, greeted him, and then invited him into his tent. There he washed the old man's feet and gave him food and drink.

The old man immediately began eating without saying any prayer or blessing. So Abraham asked him, "Don't you worship God?"

The old traveler replied, "I worship fire only and reverence no other god."

When he heard this, Abraham became incensed, grabbed the old man by the shoulders, and threw him out of his tent into the cold night air.

When the old man had departed, God called to his friend Abraham and asked where the stranger was. Abraham replied, "I forced him out because he did not worship you."

God answered, "I have suffered him these eighty years although he dishonors me. Could you not endure him one night?"⁹

Are you seeing the big picture as you move through life? God has a good plan.

3. *Realize He is not done yet.* He knows what He's doing. He knows. Trust Him.

Closing Song: #462 "Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us" (all four verses)

Community Group Discussion:

1. This morning we looked at Acts 28:1-16 in a message entitled, "*The Spectacular (and Unspectacular) Ways of God.*" Take time to re-read the text.
2. What are some of the spectacular ways we see God at work in this passage? What are some unspectacular (in other words, ordinary, not particularly obvious at first) ways?
3. What's the point of the viper in verses 1-6? What did God accomplish by allowing his servant, Paul, to get bitten by this creature? What can we learn from this about our own unpleasant experiences?
4. We see a wonderful miracle in verse 8, when God healed the father of Publius. What happened as a result of this miracle? What did God accomplish? What did He reveal about Himself?
5. Though God can heal, as He did here, there are other times when He chooses *not* to heal. What does He intend to accomplish then? What does He reveal about Himself when He allows sickness to remain?
6. In verses 11-16, Paul finally made it to Rome. When he arrived, he saw "the brothers" and "thanked God and took courage" (15). Why is that a significant statement? What does it teach us about the church?

⁹ Thomas Lindberg.